

**Interview with Helen Louise Marshall Haight
conducted and written by Mary Lipsey for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

Mrs. Helen Louise Marshall Haight, 77, (“Toots”), was interviewed by Mary Lipsey on Friday September 28, 2007. Mrs. Haight was born in the African American Community called The Pines, off Woodburn Road, near INOVA Fairfax Hospital. Helen described her home as being located after the “V” turn on Woodburn Road. Both of her parents, William B. Marshall and Helen E. Marshall had been born in Fairfax County. Her grandfather, William Collins, had owned some property in The Pines and later deeded some to each of his children, including Helen’s mother. She remembers growing up with no phone, no electricity, no television, a wood stove, an ice box which had to have a block of ice in order to keep items cool, and no running water. The water was drawn from a nearby spring, which was called Slaughter Spring after the family who owned the land. Helen remembered that spring water to be the coolest and freshest water. The family did not own a car so they walked everywhere. Her father, who worked for Wescott Nursery seasonally, Shreve Coal, and an ice company, drove for his job.

The family would walk from The Pines to attend First Baptist Church at Merrifield. Helen stated that during the winter men would have to get to church early in order to fire up the coal furnace. Helen recalled that church services on Sunday would last several hours and that all her neighbors and relatives attended the same church. Singing in the choir was very special to Helen and she still sings in church choirs today. She described a tradition, which continues today, where on the fifth Sunday of the month church choirs from Northern Virginia would unite in the Union Chorus and conduct a service in a local church. (On the fifth Sunday in September, 2007, the Union Chorus was to travel to Gainesville, Virginia.) Also, church services were a time to be dressed up. Helen explains that even now a she wears a dress and often a hat to church and that she felt that pants were meant only to be worn at home.

Helen and the community children walked from The Pines to Merrifield to attend school in a one room school house, which was later replaced by a two room school house. Merrifield Elementary for blacks housed grades one through eight. She remembered that the teachers were very strict.

There was no high school for blacks in Fairfax County when she grew up. Any black who wanted an education past the eighth grade had to choose between attending school in Washington, D.C. or going to the Manassas Industrial School. Helen walked from her home on Woodburn Road to Merrifield to catch the bus; the bus ride to Manassas was over an hour one way. The high school had students from all of Northern Virginia, north of the Rappahannock River.

Helen said she did not like attending school in Manassas, that the school building was dilapidated. In the winter, she had to keep her coat and boots on, because it was so cold in the school building. Everyone who attended the school formed a kinship. Even today, Helen will meet someone who she hasn't seen in sixty years, who remembers her from that school.

After school, every child had chores like weeding, picking beans or drawing water from the spring. For fun, the children would go to Black Marsh (today near the intersection of Arlington Boulevard and 495) and ice skate. Using pieces of cardboard, they would slide down the hill on Woodburn Road. On hot nights, Helen's family and neighbors would meet near a haystack and sing hymns and songs until it was time to go to bed.

Most of the things the family needed they had at home. Helen's mother would sew Helen's dresses, etc. Any shopping was done at Vincent's in Merrifield. At the corner of Lee Highway and Gallows Road, the Vincent family operated a general store, post office and gas station and lived behind their store. Helen remembers stopping at Vincent's for ice cream after choir practice. Helen recalls that there were some restaurants in the Merrifield area where they were not allowed because her family was African American.

As a child, Helen recalls an old building called the Liberty Lodge in Merrifield. She explained that the Liberty Lodge was a service organization started by African American men. The men helped families in times of crisis. In 1907, Ebenezer Lodge, No. 14 of the Sons and Daughters of Liberty was deeded $\frac{1}{4}$ an acre of land (near what is today Pine Ridge Park) for a cemetery. In 1965, the Fairfax County School Board condemned the property to build a new school, which was never built. In 1983, the Fairfax County Park Authority built ball fields on the land. Meanwhile, the cemetery suffered from vandalism. In 1990, the Fairfax County School Board surveyed, cleaned and fenced in the cemetery. Forty-five graves were identified of which one was Helen Haight's grandmother, Betty

Collins. Today, Helen Haight is one of the trustees of the cemetery and each Memorial Day she and family members visit the cemetery and have a devotional service there. All of Helen's family recognizes the importance of preserving and protecting the cemetery.

When asked about the changes she has seen, Helen remarked about the traffic. She commented that, today, if you have to travel down Gallows Road from Lee Highway to Arlington Boulevard, you might as well pack a sandwich, because you are going to need it. Helen Haight who has seen so much change in her lifetime, both in people and in places, concluded the interview by saying, "I am what I am, and I don't feel that I have to impress anyone."